

FLOWER OF THE GORSE

Drawings by W. Berger

BY LOUIS TRACY

Dans la ville des meunières,
Pont Aven, pays d'Amour.
Au bord des ruisseaux d'eau claire,
Fleur d'Ajone chante toujours.

—BRETON SONG

CHAPTER I. The Tower and the Well

O, LA, LA! See, then, the best of good luck for each one of us this year!"

Although Mère Pitou's rotund body, like Falstaff's, was fat and scant o' breath, and the Pilgrims' Way was steep and rocky, some reserve of energy enabled her to clap her hands and scream the tidings of high fortune when the notes of a deep-toned bell pealed from an alp still hidden among the trees.

Three girls, fifty paces higher up the path, halted when they heard that glad cry—and, indeed, who would not give ear to such augury?

"Why should the clang of a bell foretell good luck, Mother?" cried Barbe, the youngest, seventeen that September day, and a true Breton maid, with eyes like sloes, and cheeks the tint of ripe russet apples, and full red lips ever ready to smile shyly, revealing the big, white, even teeth of a peasant. "Mother" signaled that explanations must await a more opportune moment.

"Madame Pitou can't utter another word," laughed Yvonne, the tallest girl of the trio.

"She has had some secret on the tip of her tongue all day," said Madeleine, who was so like Barbe that she might have been an elder sister; though the sole tie between the two was residence in the same village. "Don't you remember how she kept saying on the train?—'Now, little ones, ask Sainte Barbe to be kind to you. She'll hear your prayers a kilometer away, even though you whisper them.'"

"Yes, and Mama would have liked us to begin singing a hymn when we started from the foot of the hill, but she thought Monsieur Ingersoll and Monsieur Tollemache would only be amused," put in Barbe.

"They would certainly have been amused before Madame Pitou reached the top, singing!" tittered the irrepressible Yvonne.

"Is it possible that I shall ever be as stout as Mama?" murmured Barbe, and the mere notion of such a catastrophe evoked a poignant anxiety that was mirrored in her eyes.

"Ah, Mignonne, now you know the form your petition to Sainte Barbe must take," smiled Yvonne.

"It's all very well for you, Yvonne, to chaff us smaller ones," pouted Madeleine.

"You're tall, and slim, and fair, and you carry yourself like the pretty American ladies who come to Pont Aven in the season, the ladies who wear such simple clothes, and hardly look a year older than their daughters, and walk leagues in men's boots, and play tennis before déjeuner. Of course you can't help being elegant. You're American yourself."

The recipient of this tribute turned it aside deftly. "Sometimes I think I am more Breton than American," she said.

"Yes, everyone says that," agreed Barbe loyally. "Next year, Yvonne, they'll make you Queen of the Gorse."

With the innocence of youth, or perhaps with its carelessness, Barbe had raised a topic as prickly as the gorse itself, because Madeleine had been a maid of honor that year, and might reasonably expect the regal place in the succeeding Fête of the Fleurs d'Ajone. Happily, Yvonne, if endowed with a sense of humor, was eminently good-natured and tactful.

"Nothing of the sort," she replied. "My father will never allow me to be photographed, and there would be a riot in Pont Aven if the shops couldn't sell picture postcards of the Queen."

"Hurry up!" cried single-minded Barbe. "Let's pray



"Before the horrified girls realized it he was clinging to the rocks."

to Sainte Barbe before Mother comes, or she'll be telling me what I must ask for, and I mean to take your advice, Yvonne."

Two faces were turned instantly toward the invisible shrine of the puissant saint, and it would place no heavy strain on the intellect to guess what favors were sought. But Yvonne hesitated. Opinions garnered in the Bohemian atmosphere of John Ingersoll's studio were in ill accord with the uncompromising dogma taught in the convent on the hill overlooking the estuary of the Aven, and labored by every sermon preached in the picturesque church near the bridge.

Yet at that instant some words uttered by her father reached her ears, and, moved by sudden impulse, she raised her eyes to the tiny arch of light that marked the spot near the summit where the interlacing branches of the avenue of elms came to an end.

"Sweet Lady Barbara," she breathed, "if you have it in your power to favor us poor mortals, please give my dear father a happy year!"

The bell, after a few seconds of silence, renewed its clamor, and the pretty unbeliever accepted the omen.

Her friends, of course, regarded the answer as more than propitious: it was an assurance, an undoubted promise of saintly intercession.

"I love Mama more than anyone in the world; but I couldn't bear to measure a meter round my waist," said Barbe confidentially.

"Even though I may never be Queen, it is something to have been a maid of honor," said Madeleine, demurely conciliatory now that her prayer was safely lodged.

Yvonne heard, but paid no heed. She was looking at the three people approaching the ledge of rock on which she and

the others were standing.

Madame Pitou, like the girls, wore the costume of Brittany, conforming, of course, to the time-honored fashion that allots a special headgear to woman-kind in each district. Thus the coif supplies an unerring label of residence. A woman from Pont Aven would recognize a woman from Riec and another from Concarneau though she had never seen either before in her life; while all three would unite, without possibility of error, in saying of a fourth, "She comes from Auray."

The two men in Mère Pitou's company were just as surely classed by their attire as the women by their coifs. Both were artists, and each obeyed the unwritten law which says that he who would paint must don a knickerbocker suit, wear a wide-brimmed felt hat, disregard collar buttons, and display a loosely knotted necktie. Ingersoll, the elder, was content with clothes of brown corduroy which had seen many, if not better, days. Tollemache, who affected gray tweed, a French gray silk tie, gray woollen stockings, and brown brogues, looked what he was, a healthy young athlete.

Tollemache had caught Mère Pitou's arm when she announced the message of the bell.

"One more outburst like that, my fairy, and we'll